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The Career of John Jacob Niles: a Study in the Intersection of Elite, Traditional, and Popular Musical Performance

Ron Pen

As a young and naive doctoral student, I approached my folklore professor with a dissertation proposal. Quivering with trepidation, I informed him that I intended to provide an initial biography and works of the composer and balladeer John Jacob Niles. The folklorist cast a bemused glance over his tortoise shell glasses and said: "He was a fraud. You realize, of course, that no folklorist would write his obituary."

Years later, with the dissertation nestled securely on the library shelves, I recalled this conversation and attempted to reconcile my understanding of John Jacob Niles's career with the folklorist's accusation. I now believe that Niles *was* guilty—not of fraud, but rather guilty of being a postmodern man in a time when neither the concept nor the term had yet been invented.

To acquire perspective on Niles's apparently contradictory career, it is necessary to examine the musical implications of postmodernism and, in the process, to study the relationship between elite, traditional, and popular categories of artistic function. Niles's intentional dissolution of musical context was not willful fraud, but rather a conscious aesthetic choice that challenged the conventions of modernist philosophy in which academically entrenched borders between elite, traditional, and normative musical functions were presented as unmalleable.

According to Jan Harold Brunvand, elite (also commonly called high art, art, or classical) music may be considered academic, progressive, documented, innovative, and subjective. Traditional (folk) music may be characterized as conservative, traditional, disseminated through oral tradition, undocumented, and objective. Popular (normative) music may be distinguished by commonality of style, popular acceptance, mass media dissemination, and a self-awareness of intent to be popular.¹

In Niles these categories intersect and dissolve. "Would the real John Jacob Niles please stand up?" Is he the composer, author and performer Dr. John Jacob Niles educated at the Université de Lyon, the Schola Cantorum, and Cincinnati Conservatory? Is he the disingenuous Johnny Niles, "mountaineer tenor,"² balladeer, and self-dubbed "Boone Creek Boy?" Is he the charismatic and popular performer John Jacob Niles who presented hundreds of performances and sold thousands of records? This intentional obfuscation of roles—this conscious dissolution of categories—is a manifestation of one of the salient aspects of postmodernist thought.

What can be more modern than modern? "How can we progress beyond the era of progress (modernity) or transgress the ideology of the transgressive (avant gardism)."³ The unsettling notion that the world was no longer grounded in a philosophy circumscribed by industrialization, progress, and modernist convention was initially broached by architectural critics. Charles A. Jenks identified the demise with confidence and precision: "Modern architecture died in St. Louis, Missouri on July 15, 1972 at 3:32 p.m. when the infamous Pruitt-Igoe scheme, or rather several of its slab blocks were given the final *coup de grace* by dynamite."⁴

Modernism identified with the precept of form following function, represented by the design of the Bauhaus school, embodied in the architecture of Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe, and enshrined in New York's Museum of Modern Art, was no longer perceived as a viable aesthetic.⁵ A new philosophical direction marked by an emphasis on historicism evolved in reaction against modernism.

The use of the term "post-modern" to describe the new aesthetic was first applied by Nikolaus Pevsner in 1961.

... the fundamental matter for an explanation of the return of historicism remains the fact that a change of architectural style took place from about 1938. . . . What is with us now has been called 'neo-sculptural', 'neo-plastic', 'neo-formalist', 'neo-expressionist'. What all these terms have in common is . . . that they express a revolt against rationalism. The leaders are a strange, impressive, if disjointed group. To pick out a few, there are those who belong to the new *post-modern* anti-rationalism, because they belonged to anti-rationalism before . . .⁶

Some of these anti-rational, postmodern values were articulated by architect/designer Robert Venturi: "complexity and contradiction, elements which are hybrid rather than pure, messy vitality over obvious unity, I prefer 'both/and' to 'either/or.'" ⁷

While the label was first applied to architecture, evidence of a reaction against modernism was certainly manifest in other disciplines as well. Ihab Hassan's literary criticism described postmodern thought as a "response, direct or oblique, to the Unimaginable which Modernism glimpsed only in its most prophetic moments."⁸ In defining postmodernism's relationship to modernism, Hassan delineated seven rubrics of modernism—urbanism, technologism, dehumanization, primitivism, eroticism, antinomianism, and experimentalism—which were contrasted with their postmodernist reaction.⁹

The term postmodern, as it applies to dance, was initially used in a purely chronological sense by choreographer Yvonne Rainer in the early 1960s to describe the novel approach at Judson Church.¹⁰ In 1975 Michael Kirby first applied the term in print to describe a particular aesthetic.

In the theory of postmodern dance, the choreographer does not apply visual standards to the work. The view is an interior one: movement is not pre-selected for its characteristics but results from certain decisions, goals, plans, schemes, rules, concepts, or problems. Whatever actual movement occurs during the performance is acceptable as long as the limiting and controlling principles are adhered to.¹¹

Sally Banes further observed that: "There are also aspects of postmodern dance that do fit with postmodernist notions (in the other arts) of irony, playfulness, historical reference, the use of vernacular materials, the continuity of cultures, an interest in process over product, breakdowns of boundaries between art forms and between art and life, and new relationships between artist and audience."¹²

In a more inter-disciplinary approach, Fredric Jameson surveyed the entire terrain of postmodern culture and postulated two essential elements of postmodernism: (1) the reaction against high modernism, and (2) the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture.¹³

While critics and historians have only recently applied the label "postmodernism" to music,¹⁴ the reaction against modernism represented by an academically entrenched aesthetic certainly stretches back to at least the 1960s. But, unlike the hegemony the international style exerted over modernist architectural thought and design, music of the twentieth century was not dominated by a single monolithic style. Rather, musical modernism can be characterized as a plurality of approaches such as impressionism, indeterminism, expressionism, atonalism, futurism, electronic experimentation, serialism, and neoromanticism. As postmodernism is a reaction against modernism, it follows that there will be as many forms of postmodernism as there were forms of modernism. According to Jameson "the unity of this new impulse—if it has one—is given not in itself but in the very modernism it seeks to displace."¹⁵ This plurality and eclecticism, is certainly consistent with Venturi's "both/and" rather than "either/or" philosophy. Rather than choose *either* tonality/historicism or atonality/avantgardism, musical postmodernity embraces the juxtaposition (and not assimilation) of *both* tonality/historicism *and* atonality/avantgardism.

Postmodernist "both/and" supports a methodology of eclecticism and of pastiche.¹⁶ The sophisticated yet universally affordable technology of electronic memory and reproduction makes "time travelers" of us all. We instantaneously pass back and forth through audible and visual images of the past and present, bounding from the Romanesque arches of Saint Martin's to the golden arches of McDonald's in a single leap. Musical styles representing every corner of the globe and every time period are available for contemporary use.

Jameson's other key element, the dissolution of the boundaries between musical functions—elite, traditional, and popular—is of particular interest regarding Niles's career. Bruno Nettl stated that one of the key directions in American musicology was "the concept of vernacular music, a recognition that the categorical concepts of folk, popular, (and) art don't really work."¹⁷ In actual practice, I would certainly agree with Nettl that these categories have been semipermeable membranes rather than rigid barriers. Walter Murphy's "Fifth of Beethoven" in disco style, Copland's fiddle tune adaptations in *Rodeo*, and even the orally disseminated "Here comes the bride . . ." sung to Wagner's tune are obvious examples of categorical transformation.

Nevertheless, the rigid categorization of artistic function has been a functioning modernist myth dictating the course of music theory, history, education, and practice. "(The effacement of key boundaries or separations . . . the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture is) perhaps the most distressing development of all from an academic standpoint, which has traditionally had a vested interest in preserving a realm of high or elite culture against the surrounding environment of philistinism."¹⁸

The conflict between theory and practice regarding this categorization can partially be reconciled by an economic theory in which the functions of elite, traditional, and popular musical styles are dictated by the economic support and transmission systems peculiar to each style.¹⁹ According to Booth and Kuhn: "elite music is based on direct patronage by monied individuals or institutions." Traditional music is supported by "communal suspension of direct sustenance activities," and popular music is supported by "indirect patronage by a mass audience." The aesthetic characteristic of each style is a direct result of the function and economic support.²⁰ Niles disseminated his communal-based folk music through a popular music transmission system, but the presentation mode was modeled on the style of art music.

The diversity of Niles's life and education enabled him to transgress cultural and stylistic boundaries. He was born in Louisville, Kentucky in 1892. Ten years later Niles's family moved to Inverness Farm in rural Jefferson County. Here, his musical education included both elite and traditional influences—his mother Louise Sarah taught him piano, and his father Thomas, a square dance caller and folksinger, exposed him to ballads and lyric folksong. Niles's folk music education continued during two principal periods of activity—during the years 1908-1914 while traveling as a Burroughs adding machine company representative, and during the years 1928-1934 spent assisting photographer Doris Ulmann.

Niles's formal studies in music training were undertaken at the Université de Lyon and the Schola Cantorum in Paris during the years 1918-1919 and at Chicago's Lyric Opera and the Cincinnati Conservatory during the years 1920-1924. Niles's education was directed towards an operatic career—his professors evinced little understanding or support for his compositional efforts and demonstrated no interest in his traditional music background.

Music conservatories carefully guarded the boundaries between art music and other "impure" forms of the medium.

In 1923, while performing with the Lyric Opera, Niles began singing both art and folk music songs for Westinghouse Company radio programs. This appears to be the first juxtaposition of elite, traditional, and popular style dissemination in his career. Niles's first music publication, "Impressions of a Negro Camp Meeting" (1923),²¹ created some confusion within the categories:

My 'Eight Traditional Tunes' looked rather well on the counters of the music stores, but how did they greet the ear when performed? I sang them everywhere. There should have been a reasonable sale, but there was not. They seemed to fall between two stools. They were neither Negro spirituals nor art songs in the truest sense.²²

Discouraged by his lack of success in opera Niles inaugurated a change of direction in his career. "I realized that just as I lacked the digital dexterity for a career as a concert pianist, so I lacked the vocal equipment for grand opera, and furthermore, all the musicianship in the known world would not rectify these two lacks . . . so I settled for the concert stage."²³ And in 1924 at the Princeton University Club of New York, Niles presented a performance composed entirely of folk music for the first time on the concert stage. The repertoire may have represented folk music but, Niles's distinctive performance style and context was completely at variance with traditional practice. Casual dress was replaced by formal attire, objective narrative style was replaced by expressive dramatic delivery more characteristic of opera, and the informality of shared communal recreation was replaced by carefully calculated programs that clearly defined the roles of performer and audience.

For over fifty years, Niles maintained a successful career predicated on his intentional blurring of the boundaries between elite, traditional, and popular music. The social and functional context of the music was dissolved, the repertoire was contextually dislocated, and the functional categories and their attendant styles were juxtaposed rather than integrated and assimilated. Niles's clearly chose the path of "both/and" rather than "either/or."

The dissolution of context and juxtaposition of styles is manifest in his earliest recordings which include traditional material such as

"Barberry Ellen" and "My Little Mohee" as well as original songs written in the style of folk music such as "I Wonder As I Wander," and "Go 'Way From My Window." Niles pragmatically chose his best material without undue concern for purity of the source—a good song was a good song regardless of where it came from. Interestingly, these recordings were released on RCA's prestigious "Red Seal" label, the home of Caruso, rather than being marketed as folk music.

While these Red Seal recordings described his performance as "mountaineer tenor with dulcimer accompaniment," his "dulcimers" bore little resemblance to the traditional hourglass-shaped Appalachian dulcimers he first encountered visiting the Balis Ritchie family near Viper, Kentucky. Niles's large instruments—one was actually reconstructed from a cello frame—were once again the result of a blurring of context and function. According to Niles:

"Years later, when I was taking my first steps into the world of the plucked dulcimer, I remembered the magnificent sonority and support produced by the noble fifths on the tympani. My parents and my friends were patient people, but they could not see drums on the keyboard of the dulcimer, a 'contraption' many of them referred to as long, slim, and shallow sounding. But with my stars I have always been truly in favor, and I stumbled on the solution quite by accident. The soundbox size I multiplied by five; the strings I multiplied by two and one half . . . here at last were the string drums I had been seeking and dreaming of for months on end."²⁴

Niles's original composition further obfuscated the boundaries. Songs such as "Black Is the Color" drew upon folk text but contained a newly composed tune, while other songs such as "I Wonder As I Wander" and "Go 'Way from My Window" were newly composed in folk style and based around the fragment of pre-existing traditional idea. Niles was perfectly comfortable juxtaposing stylistic features of art song and traditional style within the same composition. Contributing to the confusion, Niles slipped some of his own compositions, such as "Venezuela" without attribution into collections of folk music and, as a result, his music was often treated by others as public domain folk music.

If postmodern musical thought can be characterized by "historicism," "use of vernacular materials," "continuity of cultures," "new relationships between artist and audience," "the philosophy of 'both/and,'" "eclecticism," "erosion of distinction between high culture and popular culture," "plurality of approach," and "accessibility," then Niles was certainly guilty—of incipient postmodernism. But he was certainly no fraud.

NOTES

¹Jan Harold Brunvand, *The Study of American Folklore* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1986), 4-9.

²RCA M604-5 recorded on the "Red Seal" label describes Niles's performance as "Mountaineer tenor with dulcimer accompaniment."

³Hal Foster, "Postmodernism: A Preface," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983): ix.

⁴Charles Jecks, *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1977), 9.

⁵Discussion of modernist aesthetic is well represented in the article originally in *Journal of Royal Institute of British Architects*, 3rd Series, LXVIII, 1961 and reprinted in Nikolaus Pevsner, *Studies in Art, Architecture, and Design* (New York: Walker and Company, 1968), 243.

⁶*Ibid.*, 258.

⁷Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1966). Cited from Michael Collins and Andreas Papadakis, *Post-Modern Design* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 103.

⁸Ihab Hassan, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

⁹Ihab Hassan, *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975), 52-58.

¹⁰Sally Banes, "Dance," in *The Postmodern Moment*, ed. Stanley Trachtenberg (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985). Judson Church on Washington Square South was site of Robert and Judith Dunn's experimental dance workshops in conjunction with John Cage.

¹¹Michael Kirby, "Introduction," *The Drama Review* 19 (T-65; March 1975): 3.

¹²Banes, 82.

¹³Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), 11-112.

¹⁴The first discussion of the word "postmodernism" in a music book may be found in H. Wiley Hitchcock's *Music in the United States* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1988).

¹⁵Jameson, 112.

¹⁶An interesting discussion of pastiche is contained in Jameson, 113-116. Tomas Marco in his article "Modernidad y Postmodernidad en la Composición Musical" also addresses the concept of pastiche on page 59 of the same volume. He discredits the dichotomy of tonality/atonality in the interest of a generalized sonorous material.

¹⁷Bruno Nettl, "An American Voice," *The Sonneck Society Bulletin* 17:1 (Spring 1991): 7. This article was based on Nettl's address at the "American Music at Illinois" conference (Urbana, IL September 27-29, 1990). Dale Cockrell prepared the conference report for inclusion in the *Sonneck Society Bulletin*.

¹⁸Jameson, 112.

¹⁹Information concerning this theoretical model was adapted from Gregory D. Booth and Terry Lee Kuhn, "Economic and Transmission Factors as Essential Elements in the Definition of Folk, Art, and Pop Music," *The Musical Quarterly* 74:3 (1990): 411-438.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 437.

²¹*Impressions of a Negro Camp Meeting* published by Carl Fischer was an adaptation and arrangement of eight songs: "Humility," "Daniel," "John's Done Come Down," "Next Come Sunday," "Pharoah's Army," "Pray On, Brother," "Drinkin' o' the Wine," and "Heaven."

²²John Jacob Niles, "Autobiography" (John Jacob Niles Collection, University of Kentucky Libraries Special Collections Department, Lexington), 517.

²³Niles, 400-401.

²⁴Niles, 72.